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COOKING THE POTATO
by

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In most American households the potato is served more often than any other vegetable. For this reason it should be treated with the consideration it deserves. The food value of the potato, as well as the flavor and texture when cooked, depend not only upon the quality of the raw vegetable, but upon the knowledge, judgment, and skill applied to it in the kitchen.

Food Value

Potatoes are one of our principal sources of carbohydrate. They also contain mineral salts, some protein, and small quantities of vitamins A, B, C, and G. Although the protein content is low, it is of excellent quality. Since potatoes are consumed in fairly large amounts they may be an important source of several nutrients. Furthermore, unlike many other foods high in starch, potatoes furnish an excess of alkaline-forming over acid-forming substances, which adds to their significance in the diet.

Cooking Qualities

The outside appearance of a potato is no indication of its cooking quality, but it is advisable to select those of medium size, free from dirt, cuts, and decay, with as few and shallow eyes as possible. The shape and the color of the skin are not significant and differ with the varieties. Sunburned potatoes are to be avoided, because substances formed in the green areas on the surface of the potato are bitter.

A good potato should feel firm when pressed in the hand and should cut crisply. It is the "jumbo" size, especially those of globular shape, that are likely to have a hollow heart.

Potatoes should be stored in a cool, dark, moist, ventilated place.

For different methods of preparation different kinds of potatoes should be selected for cooking. Dry, mealy varieties which break into white, flaky, almost crystalline masses are ideal for mashing and baking. The more waxy varieties, because they hold their shape, are best for salad and creaming. For deep-fat frying, avoid potatoes which have been frozen or held at low storage temperatures. Because of the increase in sugar content in the potato while stored, they brown too quickly at frying temperatures.

The purpose of cooking potatoes is to cook the starch, develop flavor, and soften the cellulose. There is sufficient water in the potato to hydrate the starch. Thus it can be boiled or baked in its skin and retain all its nutrients. The flavor of the cooked potato is influenced by the method of cooking. Any method which decreases loss in cooking tends to conserve the potato flavor, while high temperatures as in baking and frying develop flavor through the influence of the temperature on the starch and sugar.

COOKING METHODS

Baked Potatoes

Select potatoes of uniform size with unmarred surface and bake in a hot oven (400-425°F.). Bake medium-sized potatoes about 40 minutes, and large ones about 60 minutes. Remove from the oven when the potato feels soft. Make two gashes with a fork on the flat side at right angles to each other. Pinch from underneath so as to force the potato through the opening. This allows the steam to escape and prevents sogginess. Drop a piece of butter in the opening, sprinkle with paprika, and serve at once.

If baked potatoes must be kept for any length of time before serving, cover with a napkin or cheesecloth and keep at the serving temperature in the oven.

Baked Potatoes in Half Shell

Bake the potatoes and cut them in half lengthwise. Scrape out the inside with a spoon, being careful not to break the skin. Mash the potato, season it with salt, pepper, butter, hot cream or rich milk, and beat until it is light. Place this mixture in the skins, brush the tops with butter and heat in a hot oven (425°F.) until they puff up and are a golden brown color. Serve immediately. For variety, sprinkle grated cheese over the potatoes before they are browned or add a very little chopped green pepper to the potato mixture.

Scalloped Potatoes

6 medium-sized potatoes	1-1/2 teaspoons salt
1-1/2 cups hot milk	White pepper
5 tablespoons butter	1 tablespoon chopped parsley
2 tablespoons flour	

Wash, pare, and slice or dice the potatoes. Grease a shallow baking dish or pan, place in it alternate layers of potatoes sprinkled with flour, salt, pepper, and dotted with butter. Pour in sufficient fresh milk to almost cover the potatoes. Unless the milk is very fresh it is inclined to curdle. Bake in a slow oven (275°F.) until the potatoes are brown on top and soft throughout. The slow oven is important in order to prevent the milk curdling or boiling over. If the potatoes become dry add more hot milk. Sprinkle the chopped parsley over the top and serve from the baking dish.

Boiled or Steamed Potatoes

For boiling or steaming, potatoes should either be thinly pared or cooked in their skins. When pared, the water should be salted. If they must be pared some time before cooking they should be covered with cold water to keep out the air. This will check the discoloration, which is due to an oxidizing enzyme present in the potatoes.

Potatoes may be cooked by steaming or boiling. In steaming place in a covered steamer over rapidly boiling water. In boiling place in boiling water to cover in a closed utensil. They should be cooked only until done, drained, the skin broken, and the potatoes dried by shaking the utensil over the flame. They should not be covered closely while hot.

Boiled or steamed potatoes may be served buttered whole with parsley, or moistened with lemon-butter, and then sprinkled with chopped parsley. Franconia potatoes are parboiled for 10 minutes, then placed in the pan with a roast and baked until tender. They should be basted along with the meat.

In new potatoes there is more protein, which on cooking coagulates and holds the starch granules in place, giving a more waxy consistency. New potatoes are delicious boiled whole and served with parsley butter or browned in fat.

Mashed Potatoes

6 medium-sized potatoes	2 teaspoons salt
1 cup hot milk or cream	White pepper
2 tablespoons butter	

The hot cooked potatoes are mashed or put through a potato ricer (or coarse strainer). Add the hot milk, butter, and seasoning, and beat until light. Serve piled high in a hot uncovered dish.

Mashed potatoes should be served at once, but if the meal is delayed, put the saucepan containing the mashed potatoes into a pan of boiling water over a low flame, or place in a baking dish and keep hot in the oven.

Duchess potatoes are mashed potatoes which have been enriched by the addition of egg, the yolk and beaten white being introduced separately. The mixture should be piled lightly into a greased baking dish and heated in a moderate oven until set. Either Duchess or mashed potatoes may be used for garnishing planked steak and fish. The potato is forced onto the plank through a pastry tube into fancy form. It is then browned in a moderate oven. Mashed potatoes are often served as nests for peas, creamed vegetables, or meats.

Shepherd's Pie

Grease a baking dish and cover the sides with a thin layer of mashed potatoes or Duchess potatoes. Fill the center with a well-seasoned stew made without potatoes, or with creamed chicken, or with fish. Cover the top with the mashed potatoes and bake in a hot oven (400°F.) until the pie is hot through and lightly browned on the top.

Potatoes au Gratin

5 medium-sized potatoes	1-1/2 teaspoons salt
2 cups milk	White pepper
1-1/2 tablespoons flour	1/4 cup buttered bread
2 tablespoons butter	crumbs

Steam or boil the potatoes until tender. Skin and dice. Prepare a white sauce from the butter, flour, salt, pepper, and milk and mix with the diced potato. Place the mixture in a greased baking dish and cover with the buttered crumbs. Bake in a moderate oven (350°F.) until golden brown. Serve from the baking dish. A half pound of grated cheese may be blended with the white sauce for a variation.

Potato Salad

4 medium-sized hot potatoes	1 cup diced cucumber
1 cup finely cut celery	1 tablespoon finely
1 tablespoon chopped onion	chopped parsley
1/2 cup French dressing	

Cut the potatoes into half-inch cubes, add the well-seasoned French dressing and onion while the potatoes are hot, to allow them to absorb the flavor. Chill for a few hours and just before serving add the vegetables and either a cooked salad dressing or mayonnaise. Serve on crisp lettuce leaves.

Variations: For an addition of color and flavor either 2 diced hard cooked eggs or 1 tablespoon of red pepper may be added to the above. In place of the cucumber, 1/2 cup of diced dill pickles or 1/2 cup of diced green pepper may be substituted.

Potatoes Fried in Deep Fat

Potatoes are fried by immersing in deep fat heated to a temperature of 365°F. to 400°F. The temperature of the fat is tested either by a thermometer or by a cube of bread. If the bread is a golden brown in 40 seconds, the fat is about 365-382°F., if golden brown in 20 seconds, it is about 382-390°F. Fats with a smoking temperature higher than that used for frying may be used over and over if properly cared for. Fat should not be heated above its smoking temperature and should be strained through cheesecloth after each frying to remove foreign materials. It should be kept in a dark, dry, cool place away from air to prevent rancidity.

The utensil used for deep-fat frying should be made of a metal which will withstand the high temperature used for frying. A utensil of small diameter will allow the use of smaller amounts of fat than a wide, flat one. A wire basket with a handle, or for smaller quantities a wire egg beater, is needed to lift the food from the fat. A long handled spoon or skimmer is used in frying large quantities of potatoes to keep them in motion and prevent the pieces sticking to each other.

Enough fat should be used to immerse completely the potatoes but care should be taken to avoid using more than this because there is danger of its bubbling over into the fire as the potatoes are added. For this same reason the potatoes should be as dry as possible before frying and only a moderate quantity should be put into the fat at one time. Too large quantities of cold potatoes, or excess water on them will also lower the temperature of the fat and delay the cooking. Remove the potatoes when they have reached the desired color and crispness and drain them on absorbent paper.

Potatoes pared and fried in deep fat are known by different names, according to the shapes into which they are cut for cooking. Saratoga chips are very thin slices of whole potatoes, which need not be pared. French fried potatoes are cut into strips one-fourth to one-half inch thick, into shoestrings, balls, or with special cutters into curls or latticed form. In shoestring form, they are called julienne potatoes.

After cutting, the pieces are dropped into cold water, drained immediately, and dried on towels before frying. As soon as they are taken out of the fat and drained they are sprinkled with salt and served. The fried potatoes, which are mealy inside should be served at once as they lose their external crispness upon standing.

Hash Browned Potatoes

5 medium-sized potatoes	1/4 cup hot water
2 tablespoons butter or fat fried out from salt pork	1-1/2 teaspoons salt White pepper

Cook the potatoes in their skins until tender. Remove the skins and chop the potatoes very fine, with the seasonings. Add chopped green pepper if desired. Place the fat in a frying pan and add the water. Put the potatoes in a thin even layer and cook over a low flame until golden brown. Fold the potato over, like an omelet, and turn into a hot platter. Garnish with parsley.

O'Brien Potatoes

Follow recipe given for hash browned potatoes and add 2 tablespoons of chopped onion and 3 tablespoons of chopped pimiento.

Lyonnaise Potatoes

5 cold cooked potatoes, diced	2 tablespoons finely
2 tablespoons chopped onion	chopped parsley
4 tablespoons butter or bacon fat	Salt and pepper

Heat the fat in a frying pan and cook the onion a few minutes. Add the potatoes and cook slowly, turning occasionally until the potatoes are golden brown on all sides. Season with salt and pepper. Serve on a hot platter with the finely chopped parsley sprinkled over the top.

Quick potato soup

1 quart milk	1 tablespoon finely chopped onion
3 tablespoons butter	1-1/2 teaspoons salt
1 tablespoon flour	1/8 teaspoon pepper
2 cups finely chopped raw potatoes	3 tablespoons chopped parsley

Heat the milk in a double boiler. Melt the butter, mix well with the flour, and add the milk, stirring constantly. Then add the potatoes and onion and cook 10 minutes. Add salt and pepper and sprinkle with parsley just before serving.

Cream of potato soup

1 pint milk	2 cups riced potatoes
1 pint potato water	1-1/2 teaspoons salt
1 small onion, diced	1/8 teaspoon pepper
3 tablespoons butter	4 tablespoons finely
1 tablespoon flour	chopped water cress

Heat the milk, potato water, and sliced onion in a double boiler. Melt the butter, mix well with the flour, and add the milk. Then add the potato and stir until smooth. Cook for 3 or 4 minutes and add the seasonings. Remove the onion and add the water cress just before serving.